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ABSTRACT

The author, an experienced principal from Washington, D.C., spent the 1975-76 school year on leave to the National Institute of Education to work on a program to identify and visit secondary schools that had experienced recent incidents of violence but were on their way toward stabilizing and containing the disruptive situation. The author discusses the selection of the schools visited, lists the schools, and discusses his approach to the visits. The major portion of the report is concerned with the author's conclusions about the role of leadership, school climate, and outside forces on the schools and with his consideration of what works to reduce violence and disruption--caring, control, and increased or improved communication. The role of the principal is emphasized. (Author/IRT)

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SCHOOLS THAT CHANGE

A REPORT ON SUCCESS STRATEGIES FOR DEALING WITH DISRUPTION, VIOLENCE, AND VANDALISM IN PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOLS

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A NEW RESPONSIBILITY------

During the 1975-76 school year, I became one of the many pilgrims moving across the United States looking for insights and perhaps revelations on the causes and cures for crime, disruption, and violence in the public schools of our nation.

My quest was not inspired as of old by religious or ideological conviction and zeal, but by the more contemporaneous forces which now create causes or pursuits: the power of public concern supported by the federal funding establishment.

School violence has become an issue transcending the traditional sphere of responsibility of local school systems and is now also the subject of concern of many federal agencies. My role is not ordinarily that of a pilgrim on quest or a knight on crusade. I am a principal, of long experience, in a large urban high school in Washington, D.C. During the summer of 1975, the National Institute of Education invited me to become part of their team of investigators working on the "Safe School Study" mandated by an act of Congress. The consensus of the Institute personnel designing the study was that it would be essential to have some person-to-person contact with the school administrators, teachers, and students who had developed successful strategies for dealing with violence and disruption.

The charge given me was to identify and visit those secondary schools which had experienced recent incidents of violence but which were on their way toward stabilizing and containing the disruptive situation.

The decision to join the NIE study group and take a year's

leave-of-absence from my high school was not an easy one. However, personal confidence in my school's students, administrative team, the majority of teachers, and the custodial staff, made it possible to accept the assignment. Yet another reason for becoming a participant in the study was the opportunity to view first hand how other secondary schools were operating, and to learn more about new trends in school organization and curriculum. And finally, the most compelling motivation came from the conviction that it was essential to have a school person work with researchers, statisticians, social scientists, demographers, and surveyors--a school person who would be a voice for the thousands of people who live and cope with the daily problems of school administration, and who would continue to do so long after the outside investigators and the media moved on to a new focus for their studies and attention.

On September 1, 1975 I reported not to the vibrant, active halls of a high school but to the subdued atmosphere of a federal office building. The question foremost in my mind that first day was: "How is it possible for people who work in such an isolated, individualistic environment ever to understand the complexities and responsibilities of school administration?" I have now become accustomed to and somewhat envious of the quiet, lengthy, uninterrupted time intervals that researchers have at their disposal as they make decisions and form policy.

My year's assignment was spelled out in an intergovernmental personnel directive. As a research associate on a 12-month leave from the District of Columbia Public Schools, I was to complete the following tasks:

1. Through literature search, telephone contacts, and other relevant means, identify public schools that have had exemplary success in dealing with school crime.
2. Consulting with other members of Safe School research staff, select 12-15 schools to be investigated personally.
3. Visit each exemplary school to collect information having to do with the reasons for the success the schools have had in preventing or reducing school crime.
4. Write a case study of each school visited from the perspective of an investigative reporter.
5. After all the exemplary schools have been investigated and all the case studies written, prepare a summary analysis on the subject which will constitute a chapter in NIE's report to Congress.

SELECTING THE SCHOOLS ------

My first task was to identify public schools that had exemplary success in dealing with school crime, incidents of violence, disruption, or vandalism. The process used for identifying the "success" schools was one that took almost six months. The first step was, of course, to agree on what we at the National Institute of Education meant by "success" or "exemplary" schools. Typically, we defined and redefined our concept, accepted and rejected lists of schools, and solicitated nominations from a wide variety of sources. In the end we agreed on the following description and canvassed the country for recommendations:

> "Success" schools would be those which had stemmed, diminished, or completely eradicated the chaos and had established an environment where the educational process could resume."

Appearing in Appendix A of this report is a listing of the agencies and individuals that were approached for recommendations.

The cooperation with and concern for our efforts provided by all of the people we contacted were heartwarming. The educational community and the agencies which provide supportive services to that community said that they valued our efforts to discover the sources of success, and viewed this approach as more positive and potentially productive than one that would seek only data on schools in turmoil and disruption.

From an abundant list of "success" schools we narrowed the possibilities down to fifteen. Our objective was to obtain some geographic, rural/urban, racial, and economic distributions in our choices. The final selection cannot of course be proffered as a scientifically controlled selection, but is made up of mutually agreed upon choices that resulted from long hours of contemplation, discussion, and analysis on the part of the NIE staff.

SCHOOLS SELECTED

ARKANSAS

Little Rock Central
High School
Little Rock, Arkansas

CALIFORNIA

Alan Loche High School
Los Angeles, California

Sacramento High School
Sacramento, California

San Fernando High School
San Fernando, California

Yerba Buena High School
San Jose, California

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

Alice Deal Junior High
School
Washington, D.C.

LOUISIANA

Alcee Fortier High School
New Orleans, Louisiana

Marion Abramson High School
New Orleans, Louisiana

MARYLAND

Booker T. Washington Junior
High School
Baltimore, Maryland

MISSOURI

Lincoln Opportunity High School
St. Louis, Missouri

Handley Junior High School
University City, Missouri

NEW YORK

New Rochelle High School
New Rochelle, New York

Seward Park High School
New York, New York

NORTH CAROLINA

Sanford Central High School
Sanford, North Carolina

PENNSYLVANIA

Abington High School North
Campus
Abington, Pennsylvania

TENNESSEE

Issac Litton Junior High
Nashville, Tennessee

MEETING THE SCHOOL PEOPLE ------

As I began my field work the efforts of the first six months of the NIE assignment took shape. The visits to the schools were exhilarating and demanding. Each visit required interaction with a minimum of ten individuals. The content of these interactions included (1) giving information about the NIE study; (2) giving information on my background as a high school principal and my role as an interviewer and observer; (3) seeking information about the interviewer's perception of the study; (4) seeking information on past history of violence, vandalism, and disruption; (5) seeking information on the current situation and people's conceptions on why or how the conditions at the school had changed; and (6) seeking data from a cross section of the school's professional staff, student body and custodial staff, and integrating all of the material.

As an observer I spent all of my time at the schools (two days per institution) engaged in face-to-face relationships with the school officials whose activities I was to analyze. In gathering data I first relied on a prepared questionnaire (see Appendix B) then asked questions which grew out of responses to the questionnaire. During the later visits I often asked permission to tape record responses so that I could refer to something other than memory and notes in preparing my summary report. In short, the process used in collecting information was one of registering or listening, recording, and interpreting.

The school people I met were open and gracious. Typically, they express satisfaction at being singled out by the National Institute of Education to become part of the study.

While all the site visits were noteworthy, I particularly recall my visit to Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas because of its place in the history of school integration. Sometime after this high school had experienced a good deal of disruption and chaos, a young black principal was appointed. He was the youngest principal ever appointed to a high school in Arkansas.

The principal at Little Rock Central High School seems to be successful because he has developed strategies for reaching all segments of the school community. When he was first appointed, he spent many hours listening to teachers, students, parents, custodians, cafeteria workers, and all who would come to talk to him about what they saw as problems.

He demonstrated an uncanny ability to get things done. He developed an excellent organization. The policies for the building were written out for students and staff alike. A policy not followed by an individual results in a face-to-face conference followed up with a written report.

The success of Little Rock Central High School, according to the principal, had to do with the student involvement in shared leadership and in their total involvement in every aspect of student campus life.

A student interviewed said of "our principal": "He has gained the respect of all students and teachers. He has proven himself fair to all and willing to listen to what anyone has to say. He has expanded student rights and responsibilities. He has constantly met with teachers and has sent various letters of

updated information to the students' parents, thus keeping them informed of current events, procedures, and rules of our school."

THE INDIVIDUAL SCHOOLS: CASE STUDIES------

The following Case Studies represent a compendium of my impressions, audio tape recordings, notes, and written responses to prepared questionnaires.

The methodological problems presented in synthesizing all of the data were immense. The "how to" of organizing and analyzing material that almost exclusively reflected the subjective interpretations of those interviewed, as filtered through my own subjective screen, made me uneasy and often reluctant to set words to paper.

I have therefore elected to use some simple observational indicators to illustrate or report on very complex, social, and institutional structures and interactions. Rather than presenting interpretive data in the Case Studies themselves, I have reserved the option to make summary comments only in the Coming to Conclusions section of this report as it would indeed be unfair to burden any one of the schools visited with the responsibility of my subjective conclusions.

The classification of data for the Case Studies reflects the way I, an experienced, high school principal, look at and compare schools. Without the benefit of my experience the tendency would be to be too analytical and too enumerative, a posture I could not and would not assume after just a day or two in any secondary school in this country.

COMING TO CONCLUSIONS ------

Since starting my assignment for NIE in September 1975, several major studies and reports have been published and numerous conferences, seminars, and workshops have been held on the general topic of school violence, crime, and disruption.

The school people I visited during the year gave little indication that they had read the reports, researched the literature, attended the conferences, or contributed much data to the studies. Rather, they attributed most of their success to the fact that they were spending 12 to 15 hours each day on the job responding to the oceanic demands of their work situation.

In summing up my impressions of the year's activities, I found much to support some of my own long-held views.

SCHOOL LEADERSHIP ------

When a school is operating well the job looks easy. Anyone who has served as a school administrator or, for that matter, taught in a classroom, knows that all schools have a great potential for disharmony, confusion, and disorganization. Secondary schools with their large adolescent and preadolescent populations are particularly prone to discord and disruption.

The school visits have confirmed my opinion that the single most crucial factor in determining whether or not (or how much) violence, crime, and chaos occur in a school is the presence or absence of competent leadership at that school.

The principal and the people to whom authority is delegated determine the quality of education, the condition of life, and the characteristics of the school climate. The responsibility is awesome. The methods of selection for the position of school

principal are at best empirical, at worse political and casual.

Principals assigned to the successful schools which I visited came in all sizes, ages, colors, religions, ethnic origins, and sexes. They had one similarity, however: All were grossly underpaid for the magnitude of demands and the numbers of hours and days of the week they were expected to give to their jobs.

The complexity of the position leaves a wide spectrum of leadership styles as possible success models for the principal's role. Indeed, Redden[1] and other sources suggest that the more flexible and adaptable to situations a person is, the better that person's leadership. Sensitivity, problem-solving capability, goal-oriented behavior, efficiency and the like are familar terms to anyone who has tried to employ or attempted to fire a school administrator.

In addition to having all of the above characteristics, the principals I visited at the successful schools had in one way or another acknowledged their responsibility for everything that happened in their school. They made decisions that were firm but not rigid. They were able to delegate responsibility without abdicating their position of authority and, perhaps most important of all, they were able to take steps that were not universally popular. Like it or not, everyone knew who was in charge and the person in charge (the principal) knew how much the cooperation and support of every adult and student in the school building was needed.

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[1] Reddin, William J.: Managerial Effectiveness, McGraw-Hill 1970.

The significance of the principal's role in stemming violence and disruption was evident. In almost all situations pupils, parents, and teachers reported that important visible changes were made in the school anywhere from two days to two weeks after the arrival of the new principal.

In listening carefully to what assistant principals, teachers, counselors, students, and security officers were saying, I heard that a school functioned relatively free from violence if the principal assumed the responsibility for resolving conflicts; initiated structure in administrative and interpersonal interactions; was sensitive to the social and emotional needs of all of the groups residing in the school; and was successful in procuring materials, personnel, and services for the school.

Simply put, by providing effective leadership and backing it up with a responsive support system, a chaotic, violent situation can quickly, efficiently, and effectively be contained, thus permitting the school to function normally.

SCHOOL CLIMATE

Much could be said about the climate or social environment of the "success" schools. What was evident to me, a transient observer, was that each school, no matter what its specific approach, was attempting to generate cohesiveness, trust, respect, and concern for all the residents of the school. Great efforts were made to identify and attend to those things which would give the student population a sense of satisfaction and a feeling of productivity. In the most successful of the schools, the similar needs of the teachers and other staff were also considered and attended to.

The message seem to be out and up front. This was a school that had adults who cared, who controlled, and who commanded. The key success factor lay in making the students and the teachers believe the message which came via curriculum and program contributions, process and interaction contributions, and management and material support contributions.

Some schools relied very heavily on curriculum changes and innovations to improve school climate. These programmatic changes gave students an opportunity for many experiential or active learning experiences. They also provided more varied, challenging learning opportunities for students. Several curriculum changes took the student out of the confines of the classroom, or school building and multiple learning environments were created. The curriculum innovations took into account the level of maturity and the gradation of skills and ability of all of the students in the school and provided for a variety of performance expectations. These schools set up a reward system that also valued things other than high grades or tests and so most of the students were assured some success experiences at the school.

Often in conjunction with curriculum changes, but sometimes as the only new strategy for getting at the causes of violence and disruption, the schools initiated process, functional, or administrative changes. Ineffective principals were removed and new leaders with greater problem-solving capabilities were installed. The administration, teachers, students, and often parents became involved in goal clarification for the school. Everyone was given an opportunity to participate in decision-making activities. The channels of communication were opened, and, most important of all, a process for acknowledging and working with conflict was

established. Accountability was established and responsibility for the form and flow of school functions was assumed by adults and students alike.

In practically all situations, attendant material support was provided to the schools. Additional personnel, funds for new curriculum material, staff training, security hardware and personnel, and increased maintenance services were some examples of the material support systems put into effect as the school moved toward improving school climate. The most successful of the "success" schools retained this material support even after the crisis subsided.

OUTSIDE FORCES

Although the principal and the school staff have great potential for creating or correcting situations leading to vandalism, violence, and disruption, the social environment of the school is in large measure determined by outside forces and conditions. Lacking the power and often the training, time, and inclination to modify those external forces, it is imperative that school administrators and staff know what the operating, economic, social, psychological, safety, achievement, recognition, and self-actualization needs of the school's student population are. They then must attempt to fill and work with these needs as fully as possible within the school program. The sphere of influence of the school administrator falls away sharply beyond the schoolhouse door. The support and interest of the school system in providing resources and adequately trained personnel; of the police in apprehending outsiders who enter the school to commit illegal acts; of the economic system to supply employment and decent wages;

of the family to set controls and standards of behavior; and of the community to reinforce the moral and ethical values, are obligations owed but often not paid to the schools of our country.

School personnel feel strongly that they are expected to be the medicine men or witch doctors of modern-day society. They are given too few tools and very little usable scientific knowledge with which to face epidemic problems. The traditional remedies of suspension, detention, transfer, dress codes, physical punishment--and "I shall not" written a thousand times--have been wiped out by court orders, parental ire, and student rights, as well as new social realities that no one could have predicted ten.

At a minimum, school personnel feel they should receive prompt, effective, supportive services from the school system and school board. A few of the requirements are:

- supplies and materials delivered on time
- repairs made promptly
- adequate building and ground maintenance
- alternative schools or placement for students who cannot or will not respond to the educational standards set for the majority of students
- training for teaching and administrative personnel to upgrade and maintain skills
- an adequate but prompt system for evaluating and removing inadequate teachers and administrators from the school
- security personnel and security devices

for keeping vandals and burglars out of the schools after hours.

School people want a responsive and cooperative police force and court system; law officers who respond promptly to calls for removal of outsiders and students who have committed illegal acts; police who show a sensitivity to the individual student and to student groups and understand their potential for violence and vandalism when dealt with improperly; recognition by the courts of the unique and difficult role of the school in shaping the character and behavior of students, and recognition of the school's need to establish controls, boundaries, and limits, and to maintain discipline; parents who view the efforts of the school positively and who have expectations for and control over their children; and communities that value their schools and provide the fiscal resources necessary for operating them.

WHAT WORKS AND WHY

Many schools in this country have operated for a long, long time under conditions of chaos, confusion, and violence. In these unfortunate situations, no individual or group seems to feel it has the power or responsibility for doing anything about the problems that are victimizing generations of young people. It is only when someone cares or is outraged by excesses that transcend acceptable limits, or when the opinion-making media gets into the act, that something seems to happen.

The larger socioeconomical conditions affecting the schools are almost never modified or touched. All efforts focus on in-school, by school-people solutions. These solutions take the

form of changing leadership, curriculum reform, organizational modifications, tougher controls and rules, student participation in decision making, increased resources, security system devices and hardware, increased counseling services, and intergroup relationship workshops. School people are really quite impotent when it comes to changing outside forces, but when what works in schools themselves is analyzed, we see that the exact nature of the change strategy does not matter too much. What does seem essential is that these in-school solutions activate strategies of caring, control, and increased or improved communication.

The literature on school crime and violence is replete and somewhat redundant with descriptions of activities initiated and conducted to reduce incidents in the schools. The categorization of these programs usually describes the materialistic end-product, rather than the social, emotional, and psychological needs of the so-called perpetrators of the antisocial acts.

It is significant, I think, that the LEAA Research for Better Schools report, "Planning Assistance to Reduce School Violence, and Disruption," developed four major categories of activities that schools are using to control violence, and the first was "Security Systems."

I contend that as long as politicians, taxpayers, and school administrators ignore the needs, frustrations, and humanity of the students who attend public shcools, the incidence of violence and disruption in the schools will grow.

A more helpful and generic organization of remedial activities would be one that organized programs into the general categories of Caring, Control, and Communication. Some elements of all three must be present if a school is to succeed as a viable educational institution.

CARING

There are many strategies that show students that people care; good teachers and school administrators have used them for years, and each one of us can cite at least one school incident where caring made the difference. Showing care and concern for students is of course easier in smaller schools--a good reason perhaps to keep populations down to 1,100 or less. Caring strategies include knowing each student by name, where the student belongs during a given period, knowing his/her family and who the student's friends are.

Caring means providing opportunities for active learning, flexible, varied curriculum, multiple learning environments, and an inclusive rather than exclusive reward system. It means providing bus tokens to get to a job, a counselor who helps you find a job, advice on how to plan a program, non-judgmental extra help in reading and math, and a strong adult who knows how to say "No" or "Hold it." Caring means schools that have supplies, books, clean halls, and teachers who come on time and work with you. It means school dances, plays, traditions, and a football team with uniforms. The list can grow longer and longer without significantly adding to the basic idea. Students need to feel a sense of personal satisfaction and recognition from the school and this includes needs for inclusion, affection, and control. The principal needs the help of students, co-administrators, custodial force, teachers and parents. Also in many ways the principal needs to develop caring strategies for the adults on the scene as well as for the students. These approaches are not much different from the ones described for the adolescents in the building,

although they might be even more demanding of the principal's effort and time.

If the school board and central administration are wise, they will value and support their school principals as much as possible. Caring by the Board and administration means frequent public and private recognition of a job well done, and prompt responses to requests for maintenance, repairs, supplies, and personnel.

While control and communication are discussed with some detail in the next paragraphs, it is important to say here that caring also means that the system values the individuals and groups in that system enough to establish controls and protection for the rights of all. To care means that individuals and groups are given the opportunity to know what is going on in the school, to have some influence on the process, and to be able to express dissatisfaction without being excluded, ostracized, or punished in some other manner.

CONTROL

The school administrator is expected by students, parents, and teachers to be in control of a large number of things: traffic and buses, repairs and windows, instruction and books, curriculum and courses, good nutrition and the cafeteria food, the safety of individuals, and all the things that go on in and around the school. The control is wanted, needed, and, of course, often resented at one time or another by everyone concerned. It therefore must be present but unobtrusive.

The wisdom of Solomon, the insight of Dr. Spock, and the authority of Solon are the trinity of virtues needed to successfully institute and maintain control. The control mastery of the

most successful principals, while largely unseen, is not unknown. Strength and success lie in communicating to faculty and students the knowledge that when their personal control systems fail, that of the principal will remain safely and reassuringly intact--that they may not abdicate their responsibilities, but should they falter, the strength, firmness, and common sense that will help them reassert their better selves will be supplied by their principal.

To this is added the delicate balance of a stern, uniform but flexible code of discipline or behavior expectation that is well known to all, firmly enforced and only gradually relaxed.

COMMUNICATION

One of the most successful principals I met during my visits said that the key to the lack of violence and disruption at his school was the fact that he and his team of administrators knew before most of the student body did when and where the trouble was brewing. "The kids come and tell us what's happening. They want help but often can't ask for it directly."

It is obvious that most of the teachers, administrators, and counselors in the "success" school laugh, joke, and show satisfaction when communicating with students in the hallways, classrooms, and other meeting places. Good communication in these schools takes place on the personal, group, and intergroup level. Adults talking with children are courteous, open, and spontaneous. There is much expression and acceptance of feelings. The tone set in these one-to-one communications is warm, friendly, and sincere. Students are encouraged to be open, polite, and supportive of one another and of their teachers.

At the group level there are indepth, ongoing discussions.

Individuals are given an opportunity to express feelings, to share information, and, most important of all, to develop group feelings by supporting one another. Group goals are expressed and tested for consensus and commitment.

At the intergroup level there is much opportunity for collaboration with other groups. People are encouraged to enter a conflict situation with the understanding that compromise and consensus are the goal rather than outright concession. Individuals and groups are involved in rather than excluded from.

Daily news bulletins, weekly school newspapers, and of course the ubiquitous loudspeaker are other devices used to keep people in close communication.

Any method that enables people to know, to be heard, and to be included helps the situation. Rumor monitoring, open parent and community meetings, student councils, open-door policies, parent participation in school and classroom activities, and intergroup relationship workshops and conferences are familiar tactics employed by schools to open up or improve communications.

What works and why? Analyze any of the success schools and you will find an adroit school administrator that knows how to concoct a delicate, delectable stew from some combination of the ingredients of caring, control, and communication that is generously offered to students, teachers, and parents as they all work toward making their school free of disruption, violence, and vandalism.

The professional life of the school principal is prolonged and his continued productivity ensured if the people in the central administration provide some nurturing by way of real support

services and public recognition. Certainly not all the problems are solved by this formula, but in place of rampant violence and crisis, it provides everyone with a chance for survival and growth.